

Scrimpin' and Scrapin': The Hardships and Hustle of Women and Food Insecurity in Texas

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*This research goes out to
Every woman who has had to hustle to put food on the table
and
In remembrance of Matilda Berry, Mariab Blair, Liddie Green,
Estella Neals, Katie Lavert Morgan, and Tonnette Blair,
six generations of matriarchs in my family.*

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A woman buys fresh produce from a farmer's market in Dallas

INTRODUCTION

*"Research is formalized curiosity.
It is poking and prying with a purpose."*
Zora Neale Hurston

If you want to know something, ask questions. Study people. Learn about them from what they do. That is the work of an anthropologist. Zora Neale Hurston, the critically acclaimed writer and folklorist of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, wrote vividly and brilliantly about the Black American experience. As an anthropologist who studied and wrote about the lives of Black people in the southern part of the United States, the Black South, Hurston had an extraordinary way of giving us a front row seat to the unparalleled authenticity of what it meant to be Black, disenfranchised, oppressed, smart, resilient, hopeful, and unwavering in our faith. In fact, after earning her BA in Anthropology from Barnard College in New York, following semesters at Howard University, Hurston went on to research and record Black culture as part of the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Project Administration in the 1930s. It was from this research that she used much of the language, stories, and dialect – combined with her imaginative spirit – that appears in her published works that demonstrate the breadth and depth of her brilliance and literary genius. These masterpieces include *Mules*

and *Men, Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Moses: Man of the Mountain*. She chronicled the real-lived experiences of Black people and captured their joys, sorrows, happy times, and hardships, in prose and folklore, as written testaments that will forever be accessible, made fresh and anew each time her work is engaged and discovered for the first time or rediscovered. Hurston used her impeccable writing skills to research and document the Black American culture and experience, and to tell the story of a population of people whose lives mirror our own in many ways, with the same struggles, hopes, disappointments and triumphs in iterations that we might have overlooked were it not for the cataloging that Hurston did. She was and is our griot, a storyteller, who handled well the responsibility and sacredness of telling the intimate and intricate details of the experiences of Black life.

It is in the spirit of research and focusing on the real-lived experiences of a particular people that inspired and prompted the publication of the documentation that is before you. As part of my doctoral research at Memphis Theological Seminary on the interrelatedness and nexus of faith and food insecurity, food apartheid, and the cumulative iterations of gentrification and displacement of Black, Latinx and Indigenous peoples, I wanted to offer an introduction, an entry point if you will, to the hardships and hustles of women who are facing food insecurity in various communities in Texas. Why Texas? Because Texas is often not included in the national narratives on food insecurity, and certainly the experiences of women in Texas are not told.

This book has some limitations; it *is not* an exhaustive or extensive look at the entire state nor is it an advanced and detailed exploration; rather it is a broad stroke of some rural and urban areas in mostly east, central, northeast, and south Texas. While my research is on Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities, it is not a disregard for the Asian American community. Food insecurity data for this demographic is sparse. According to the New York City Food Policy Center, in their 2021 report *The Hidden Problem of Food Insecurity Among Asian Americans*, “the

lack of information raises key questions about the physical and mental health of the nation’s fastest growing minority population and requires dismantling the model minority myth that has led many researchers as well as average Americans to assume that few Asian Americans would have trouble affording or accessing the food they need.”¹

The intent of this work is to introduce you to this foodways narrative around women and food insecurity. Foodways is the eating habits and culinary practices of people. It is also the cultural, social, and economic practices related to the production, purchase, and consumption of food. In other words, it is the cumulative set of factors that are used in determining how you access the food that you eat. The intent of this work is also to give you some insight specifically through the lens of what is called a hermeneutic of food theology. Hermeneutic is simply knowledge gained through an interpretation or a way of looking at something, particularly a biblical text, to discover more about the context, truths, and values. To help paint the picture, I offer some national perspective, too.

As an ordained Methodist pastor, public theologian, and food justice activist, I look at the ways that the Christian faith tradition intersects and wrestles with the injustices and deficiencies in our foodways systems. I ask a lot of questions, and more pointedly, in what my dear friend and clergy sister, the Rev. Dr. Teresa Smallwood says, *What is our ecclesial response to food insecurity?* In other words, more than just being aware and knowing that there are those in our community who are struggling to get access to fresh, affordable, diet specific and culturally specific healthy food, what is our *reasonable response* to addressing the issues and working toward equitable, barrier-breaking solutions that ensure our neighbors have healthy food to eat? More aptly asked, How is God calling me *and us* to respond to this communal issue? I invite you to wrestle with this and to sit in that wrestle for a while, especially if you have never been food insecure. On the probable chance that your kitchen pantry or cupboard has been bare, or you personally know someone who has

¹ Regan Elyse Murray, *The Hidden Problem of Food Insecurity Among Asian Americans*, August 11, 2021, www.nycfoodpolicy.org

been food insecure, or you have served at a food bank, maybe you have already wrestled with it, questioned it, and formed an opinion about it. I invite you to now consider how you might respond to this situational hardship in a faith-centering way. Let your faith lead you in how you engage in this conversation around food insecurity. The church cannot stay silent on this nor can we just pray it away. We must be people of faith who activate our faith in tangible, meaningful and transformative ways. This is our moment to be ecclesial disruptors of a system that has caused harm and left many of our neighbors uncertain about their access to healthy food.

Scrimpin' and Scrapin': The Hardships and Hustle of Women and Food Security in Texas is an examination, a food geography, an open door to the real-lived experiences of Texas women, some whose stories were shared with me. I look at it through a “good food” theology lens, an epistemology that interrogates and asks questions, and seeks to find answers and solutions that transform the experiences of people from *food insecure* to *food secure*, and I study the biblical text to raise up what God has to say about it. From barely thriving, barely eating, to having enough and plenty. It is influenced by my experiences as a Black woman. Being vocal is tied to my nativity story. When I was born my parents named my “Y”vette. The Y is not silent. They prophesied that God would use me to be a prophetic voice to speak up and out about injustices. That is what I aim to do here.

This book combines statistical information about food insecurity and a brief examination of some of the root causes, things like lack of grocery stores, insufficient income, and systemic issues, structural racism, gender disparities and policies that leave the vulnerable among us exposed and struggling to buy enough food. Such systemic issues lead to food deserts, neighborhoods where there is an absence of grocery stores. That term, which I will talk about more in depth, is being phased out by food justice activists, city leaders and grassroots organizations and replaced with *food apartheid*, a more accurate term since the root cause

is about systemic injustices. In a 2019 article in *Blavity*, in the wake of my own neighborhood in the Oak Cliff area of Dallas being declared a food desert when the big box retailer Walmart suddenly closed and abandoned my community, I wrote that food is political, and that food apartheid is deeply impacting Black communities. “Let’s see how the politics of the conversation changes when we call it by its rightful name – food apartheid, a system that disenfranchises people based on race, rather than food desert, a term that doesn’t fully grasp the economic and political power at work. Food desert arguably sounds like an area that is aging and dying, and that when the people dry up, the stores dry up.”² That term, food apartheid³, was coined by a Black woman, Karen Washington, a national food justice activist in New York and a founding member of BUGS (Black Urban Growers), who said that the inequities and disparities in our foodways system is a product of systemic racism in the US. “‘Food apartheid’ looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics,”⁴ Washington noted.

I also offer a pastoral perspective of looking at biblical texts through the Black woman’s experience, because as Zora Neale Hurston said, “Black women are the mules of the earth.”⁵ We are carrying burdens seen and unseen. “Womanism requires that we stress the urgency of the African American women’s movement from death to life. Womanist religious scholars [and theologians] insist that individuals look back at race, sex, and class constructions before it is too late and put forth critical analysis in such a way that the errors of the past will not be repeated,”⁶ said pioneering womanist scholar and theologian Katie Geneva Cannon.

² Yvette R. Blair, “Food is Political: How Food Apartheid is Deeply Impacting Black Communities,” *Blavity*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.blavity.com/food-is-political-how-food-apartheid-is-deeply-impacting-black-communities?category1=opinion&category2=politics>

³ Anna Brones, “Karen Washington: It’s Not a Food Desert, It’s Food Apartheid,” in *Guernica Magazine*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.guernicamag.com/karen-washington-its-not-a-food-desert-its-food-apartheid/>

⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (Lippincott Publishers, 1937)

⁵ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. (New York: Continuum, 1995)

It is out of this that I will also offer a *womanist theology of scrimpin' and scrapin'*. When was the last time you heard a sermon that centered food justice from a biblical perspective? When was the last time you preached about food justice? During my years in pastoral ministry in The United Methodist Church and beyond, including church planting and serving as the first woman senior pastor at First Christian Methodist Church in Dallas, I preached a few sermons about food justice. At First Christian is where I also began to shape and ground my work with a more prophetic urgency as we found our community suffering from food insecurity.

I will say more about womanist theology in chapter one and how it has its roots in womanist, a term coined by Pulitzer Prize-winning author and scholar Alice Walker but let me pause here if this word is new in your vocabulary wheelhouse. Womanism seeks to liberate those who are oppressed, unmute the voices of those who have been silenced and dismantle the walls of patriarchy (especially a white male dominant narrative) that hinder us from flourishing. Womanism intentionally amplifies the voices and experiences of those who have been cast to the margins of society. Marginalization is an experience that women in particular, and Black and other minoritized women specifically know all too well. I prefer the term minoritized over minority because the latter suggests a ranking and devaluing of a person based on ethnicity or race. It is a cataloging or grouping of people of color, that historically the United States has used to discredit and dismiss non-white people, in a way that has been entrenched in oppression, discrimination and racism. I don't believe that anyone is a minority in God's *kingdom* (a community of kinship). Minoritized, then, is the way in which people with privilege and power treat non-white people. For too long, white people have elevated themselves as majority, more than, greater than in this societal formula where racism continues to be the common denominator. It is birthed out of white supremacy.

Historically, Black women have been getting by, barely making it, making ends meet when there hasn't been enough to stretch to get from

one end to the other. We have been scraping together whatever we could muster up and find in our piggy banks, coin purses, kitchen pantries and refrigerators. We've been rubbing two quarters together, hoping it becomes a dollar. We've been cutting back, *scrimping* – on necessities not just luxuries – because we simply did not have enough money at a given time. We had, as the Church Mothers would say, more lint in our purses than coins to cover it, and sometimes those coins got stuck in the lining of our purses that we used so much until we wore a small hole in it. But in faith talk that is tried and true, somehow God provided, and we always managed. We have kicked some doors and made some dents in these structural racist barriers, but we have not dismantled them. Yet.

This is not to suggest that Black women are the *only* ones who are scrimpin' and scrapin', but it is to offer for your consideration that Black women are systematically and routinely discriminated against and relegated to the last of something and are expected to be content with the leftovers. For a long time our story was a narrative of surviving with leftovers because we were served inequities, disparities, and scarcity. We face the staggering reality of the three-fold isms: *genderism, classism, and racism*. While this research is not solely the narrative of the Black woman's experience – I include the voices of Latinx, Indigenous and white women – it is a work that centers the Black woman's perspective. Scrimpin' and scrapin' is a social condition of trying to make ends meet. Hardships do not come with warnings or time limits. Many people have faced hard times whether it is suffering a financial setback, living in inadequate housing conditions, enduring unemployment, underemployment, or going through seasons when food is scarce. And it is the women who are adversely affected.

In the final chapters, I will focus on salmon croquettes and how they have been misappropriated as cheap or "stretch meals." I will also delve into the story of the Widow at Zarephath, found in 1 Kings 17 and explore the narrative of leftovers.

The work that you see here was expanded from a May 2021 presentation that I gave at the University of Guelph – Canada, as part of the

Rural Women's Studies Association 14th Triennial Conference, *Kitchen Table Talk to Global Forum*. The conference brought together scholars, writers, activists, professors, and students in a space that emphasized how conversations, relationships, and food shape rural communities. It also allowed for the consideration of the ways that gendered, sexual, ethnic, and racial identities affect personal power, class consciousness, individual choice, and community development. All of this is embodied in some form or fashion in our foodways. That twenty-minute presentation that I gave is the genesis for the framework that expands the conversation. By the spring of 2022 as I was in the writing stage of my doctoral capstone project, "*Reframing the Narrative of Food Insecurity: Creating a Faith-Based Food Policy That Addresses Food Apartheid in the Red Bird Community of Dallas*," I realized that in my research it was challenging to find the voices of Black women, particularly in theology, who were talking and publishing about food insecurity through the lens of faith. This work is critical and since the voices were few, I knew I was being called to add my voice, in print, to this narrative around faith and food justice. The Y is not silent. I continue to live into this name.

It is my hope that you gain more awareness about food insecurity and see it as a social justice, political, and theological issue. People who do not have access to food are not lazy, nor should that be our ecclesial response or internalized opinion. There are known and unknown variables about their circumstances and situational location. And if we believe that God is the God of abundance – which I do – and that God declared that the earth would always be replenished with fruit-bearing trees, then food insecurity is antithetical to the Gospel. God's word says in Genesis 1:29: **God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (NRSV)**. This was the providential provision spoken *from the beginning*, in the beginning. It is so central to life, that it is part of the creation story. We were never meant to go hungry, to go without food, to suffer food insecurity. God

spoke food security and abundance. And that means as people of faith, we have a responsibility to start having the kinds of conversations that steer us toward food security and away from victim-shaming and blaming. If we are going to be the prophetic voices in our communities that God is calling us to be, then we have to disrupt and dismantle these systemic injustices and replace them with policies that we help create – ones that promote flourishing; we must advocate for even distribution of wealth and resources, and work to end food insecurity and all its iterations in whatever ways it shows up.

I also offer some resources at the end of the book that you can use, and along the way, I will offer some suggestions on ways that you, your small groups, your faith community, your organization, or you and your neighbors, can get involved in this movement toward ensuring that the vulnerable among us have healthy food that is accessible and affordable.